

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Topline Report of Findings from Eight Focus Groups to Assess Tagline and TV Commercial Ideas to Support the Combined Messaging Demonstration Project (Oklahoma and Tennessee)

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INTRODUCTION

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is developing tagline and advertising ideas for use in a two-state demonstration project to gauge the effectiveness of a combined messaging/high visibility enforcement campaign. This campaign will endeavor to influence men ages 18-34 to obey basic rules of the road (e.g., driving at safe speeds, using seat belts, not driving impaired, not driving distracted).

For this phase of campaign development, eight taglines and four TV commercial ideas were assessed during focus groups in two cities: Oklahoma City and Nashville.

Eight groups were held – four in each city – with a total of 72 respondents:

Oklahoma City:

- July 12, 2011:
 - Men ages 18-25 (9 respondents)
 - Men ages 26-34 (9 respondents)
- July 13, 2011:
 - Men ages 18-25 (9 respondents)
 - Men ages 26-34 (9 respondents)

Nashville:

- July 27, 2011:
 - Men ages 18-25 (9 respondents)
 - Men ages 26-34 (9 respondents)
- July 28, 2011:
 - Men ages 18-25 (9 respondents)
 - Men ages 26-34 (9 respondents)

For all groups, respondents were pre-screened to ensure they met these characteristics:

- Licensed drivers who drive at least 10 miles per day at least twice a week
- Self-describe themselves as having certain characteristics that typify risk-takers
- Agree to at least one of three statements that imply false justification for breaking basic rules of the road

For the assessments of the taglines, simple boards with these eight taglines were shown for discussion:

- Day and night, flashing lights. The crackdown is on.
- Drive right or face the lights.
- Drive by the law or stop for the cop.
- Every driving violation gets a citation.
- Beware. Cops are everywhere.
- Drive safe or get busted.
- Flashing lights. Every day. Every night. Drive right.
- More cops. More stops.

For the commercial ideas, animatics-formats of four TV commercials were presented. Although called simply “A,” “B,” “C,” and “D” during the group discussions, these are the titles of the scripts as they are known by NHTSA and its contractor for this project:

- “Bubbles” (commercial “A” in the groups)
- “Heart Beat” (commercial “B” in the groups)
- “Super Cops” (commercial “C” in the groups)
- “Cops Are Watching” (commercial “D” in the groups)

Taglines and commercials were presented to each group in a random order to help neutralize potential bias.

For this topline report, numbers of respondents and grade-point-averages (for TV commercial appraisals) are referenced. However, these are reported only to help illustrate the similarities and/or differences in certain findings; they are not intended to be statistical validations, for focus group research (due to small sample sizes and other factors) is qualitative – rather than quantitative/statistical – in nature.

PRIMARY TOPLINE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Use the tagline “More cops. More stops.”
- Use the TV commercial idea “Bubbles”

TOPLINE FINDINGS --- TAGLINES

Of the eight taglines assessed, two in particular were commended for particular strengths. As noted in more detail below, these two that generated the most favorable comments and were considered the most effective by the most groups/respondents (the first one even more so than the second one):

- More cops. More stops.
- Drive safe or get busted.

However, even including these, no single line overwhelmingly topped the others. Rather, there was a range of opinions about which line would be most effective in conveying the campaign’s core message of stepped up enforcement.

In order of most favorable assessment:

#1: More cops. More stops.

In a brief written exercise, when respondents worked independently to choose which single line best conveyed the primary communications objective (i.e., stepped up enforcement of the rules of the road) –

- 17 respondents – the most for all the lines – chose this as the best line to achieve the communications objective
- At least one respondent in six of the eight groups chose it (except for the line, “Drive safe or get busted,” this was the highest number of groups selecting it); this is somewhat indicative of broad appeal

Frequently mentioned strengths of this line were (1) simplicity because the brevity of only four short words; (2) use of rhyme (which makes it “catchier” and easier to remember); (3) an implied threat (vs. direct threat) of enforcement. Several respondents said this line would raise their consciousness levels about expecting more police on the roads, and it would therefore make them more conscious about safer driving. There were also a few comments about the line making law-abiding drivers feel safer and more secure in thinking that higher levels of law enforcement were in place.

On the critical side, respondents questioned the credibility of the line. In other words, would there truly be more police? And would they actually be stepping up enforcement? Otherwise, without a perception of increased enforcement and/or more visibility, respondents would consider it an empty threat without any teeth.

#2: Drive safe or get busted.

In the brief written exercise, when respondents worked independently to choose which single line best conveyed the primary communications objective (i.e., stepped up enforcement of the rules of the road) –

- 10 respondents – second most of all the lines – chose this as the best line to achieve the communications objective.
- Although these 10 selections “tied” with two other lines, other notes suggest it was the second-ranked line in terms of favorability. One of these is the observation that at least one respondent in six of the eight groups chose it (except for the line, “More cops. More stops,” this was the highest number of groups selecting it)

Commonly mentioned strengths of this line were (1) simplicity and succinctness of the line; (2) assertiveness connoted by the word “busted.”

On the critical side, three points were raised frequently: (1) the credibility issue, given respondents’ observations and anecdotes about many unsafe drivers they know who never get caught; (2) “safe” driving is a relative term; what seems safe to one driver may not be safe and/or may not be lawful; (3) grammatically, many respondents suggested the word “safe” be changed to “safely” (implying the word was somewhat distracting to them).

#3: Every driving violation gets a citation.

In the brief written exercise, when respondents worked independently to choose which single line best conveyed the primary communications objective (i.e., stepped up enforcement of the rules of the road) –

- 10 respondents – second most of all the lines – chose this as the best line to achieve the communications objective.
- Although these 10 selections “tied” with two other lines, other notes suggest it was the third-ranked line in terms of favorability.
- At least one respondent in five of the eight groups chose it

Strengths of this line were (1) the rhyme and (2) use of unique, not-so-common words.

Criticism centered mostly on (1) the credibility issue, given respondents’ observations and anecdotes about many drivers (including themselves) who break traffic laws, yet don’t get caught; (2) looking and sounding too long, especially with the number of syllables; several respondents suggested removing the word “driving”; (3) uncommonness of the words “violation” and “citation,” even though it was believed most drivers would know and understand the words.

#4: Day and night, flashing lights. The crackdown is on.

In the brief written exercise, when respondents worked independently to choose which single line best conveyed the primary communications objective (i.e., stepped up enforcement of the rules of the road) –

- 10 respondents – second most of all the lines – chose this as the best line to achieve the communications objective.
- Although these 10 selections “tied” with two other lines, other notes suggest it was the fourth-ranked line in terms of favorability.
- At least one respondent in four of the eight groups chose it; interestingly, three of these four were in Oklahoma City; only two Nashville respondents in one group chose it

Strengths of this line were (1) its assertiveness, braced by the word “crackdown”; (2) the imagery conveyed by the phrase “flashing lights”; (3) the implication of 24/7 enforcement. Further, there were several suggestions that the phrase “the crackdown is on” be combined with one of the other lines or at least be used somewhere in the advertising, even if it were not part of the slogan.

Criticism was consistent in nearly every group: (1) too long, too many words; (2) among many respondents who did not like the “crackdown” reference, it was deemed overly threatening and sinister.

#5: Drive by the law or stop for the cop.

In the brief written exercise, when respondents worked independently to choose which single line best conveyed the primary communications objective (i.e., stepped up enforcement of the rules of the road) –

- 9 respondents – third most of all the lines – chose this as the best line to achieve the communications objective.
- At least one respondent in five of the eight groups chose it

Strengths of this line were (1) the more specificity of the phrase “drive by the law” vis-à-vis “drive safe” and/or “drive right”; (2) the “stop” and “cop” rhyme.

Criticism centered on its length and its failure in an attempt to be clever. Respondents in many groups laughed at the line and believed it would not be taken seriously.

6, 7 and 8

The other three lines – **“Drive right or face the lights.”**; **“Beware. Cops are everywhere.”**; and **“Flashing lights. Every day. Every night. Drive right.”** – garnered significantly more critical comments than favorable comments. In the written exercise, when respondents worked independently to choose which single line best conveyed the primary communications objective, these lines were chosen by only six, six and four respondents, respectively.

Relative in particular to “Beware. Cops are everywhere.” suggestions were voiced in several groups that the word “beware” be changed to “be aware.” When shared with some of the groups, response was very favorable to such a change, for it would avoid casting police officers in a bad, “scary” light. “It’s like a calm alert, instead of a scare alert” according to one respondent, whose comment reflects those of others.

TOPLINE FINDINGS --- TV COMMERCIAL IDEAS

Two commercial ideas – “**Bubbles**” and “**Heart Beat**” – were assessed more favorably by a notable margin than “**Super Cops**” and “**Cops Are Watching.**”

Among these top two, “**Bubbles**” had some particular conceptual strengths that have led to the recommendation of using it for this demonstration project.

Bubbles

Respondents reacted very favorably to the clarity and engaging nature of this concept. They also praised the way it presented a wide range of unlawful driving behavior. Further, in addition to reminding them to be more conscious of their own behavior, it conveyed to them the importance of defensive driving, given that they share the road with many others who are breaking laws.

One scene in particular stood out in respondents minds, and they all expressed positive opinions about it: The aerial scene depicting a highway junction with nearly every vehicle being labeled with an unsafe behavior.

Criticism focused on relatively minor executional elements. One in particular was suggested numerous times: Don’t show the word “POP” when the bubbles are popped. This apparently was a distraction and reminded many respondents of the *Batman* TV series. Another comment raised by several people was the elimination of the word “I’m” in the bubble graphics; however, rationale for doing this was never clearly articulated other than it would simplify the scenes.

A small number of respondents said the bubbles idea was “gimmicky” “lame”/“uninteresting,” and/or confusing in terms of trying to keep up with the audio and graphics.

In a grading exercise, “Bubbles” was rated as follows, relative to its effectiveness in conveying a stepped-up enforcement message:

Effectiveness grades:

A’s = 19 (*most “A’s” of all commercials*)

B’s = 40 (*most “B’s” of all commercials*)

C’s = 7

D’s = 5

F’s = 0

(*one respondent failed to mark his grade*)

Grade point average: 3.03
(A = 4.0, F = 0.0)

Heart Beat

This commercial idea evoked memories for many respondents – memories of the times they had been pulled over, also times they had seen flashing police lights in their mirrors only to find the officer was pursuing another driver. It was this idea's ability to evoke those feelings that gave it an ability to stand out as a viable concept.

However, many respondents did not like not knowing why the drivers in the commercial were being pulled over; the violations were not clear to them. Several also felt that the depictions of nervousness, anxiety, etc. were overdone and unnecessarily repetitive. On an executional level, many criticized the excessive sweating, citing these scenes as over-the-top, distractingly silly, and/or unrealistic.

In the grading exercise, "Heart Beat" was rated as follows, relative to its effectiveness in conveying a stepped-up enforcement message:

Effectiveness grades:

A's = 18

B's = 24

C's = 26

D's = 2

F's = 2

Grade point average: 2.75

(A = 4.0, F = 0.0)

Super Cops

Except for numerous references to "creative" and "funny" (and therefore, attention-getting), this commercial idea garnered few positive remarks of a specific nature.

As for the abundant number of critical comments, most fell under these categories:

- The idea trying to play off of *The Terminator* or *Robo-Cops*; others commented that the idea seemed to be like a video game
- Not believable depicting police as super human or having super powers
- Silly; the message won't be taken seriously

In the grading exercise, "Super Cops" was rated as follows, relative to its effectiveness in conveying a stepped-up enforcement message:

Effectiveness grades:

A's = 0

B's = 18

C's = 18

D's = 24

F's = 12

Grade point average: 1.58

(A = 4.0, F = 0.0)

Cops Are Watching

A relative few respondents had anything favorable to say about this idea. Most who did offer positive remarks commented on it being funny. In particular, they liked the scene of the driver trying to explain why he was speeding, followed by audience laughter.

However, the larger number of critical remarks fell mostly under these categories:

- Too much like a situation comedy
- Weird/awkward
- Portrays cops in a bad light – that they’re just out to get people, meet quotas, and/or enjoy catching people; self-aggrandizement
- Citizens should be applauding, not cops, in the end-scene

In the grading exercise, “Cops Are Watching” was rated as follows, relative to its effectiveness in conveying a stepped-up enforcement message:

Effectiveness grades:

A’s = 1

B’s = 7

C’s = 11

D’s = 36 (*most “D’s” of all commercials*)

F’s = 17 (*most “F’s” of all commercials*)

Grade point average: 1.15

(A = 4.0, F = 0.0)